

Countering Violent Extremism and Radical Rhetoric

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A 'Soft' Approach to Combat Terrorism

- Traditionally, CT has focused on repression of militant groups
 - Arrests, violent interrogations, air strikes of militant training camps, targeted assassinations...
- In recent years, growing view that CT alone is insufficient to combat terrorism
 - Backlash can result in increased level of violence
 - Growing channels of recruitment via the Internet and social media
- Rapid global investment in 'soft' measures to counter terrorism, commonly referred to as countering violent extremism, or CVE

What is CVE?

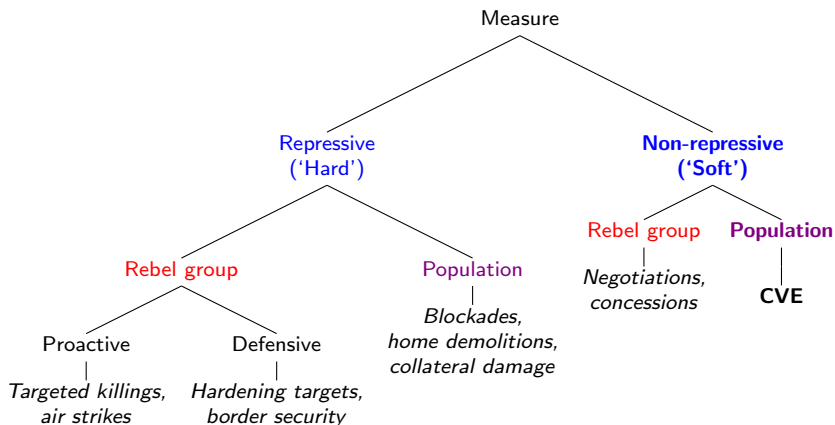
- “Proactive actions to counter efforts by extremists to recruit, radicalize, and mobilize followers to violence.”

(Department of Homeland Security CVE Task Force)

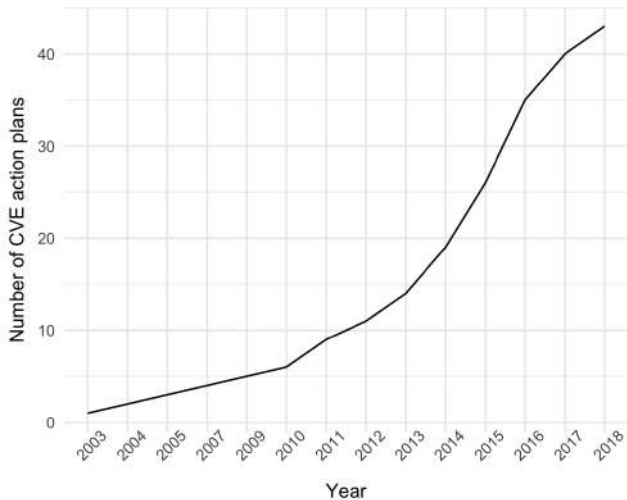


Source: GAO analysis of information from the White House, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS); FBI (adapted photographs); Art Explosion (clip art). | GAO-17-300

How Does CVE Relate to CT?



Dramatic Increase in National Action Plans to Counter Violent Extremism

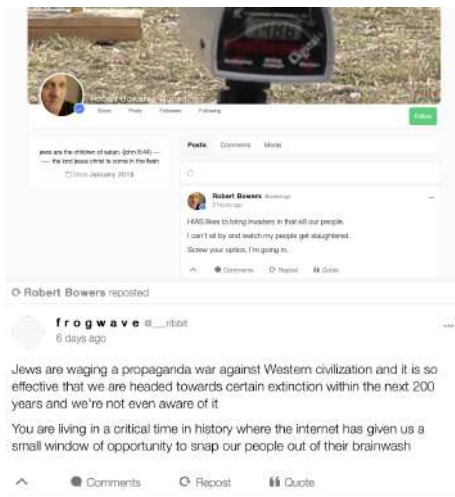


Extremist groups use social media extensively

- Groups using online platforms range from jihadists to white nationalists to neo-Nazi supporters
- Many use the Internet and social media to
 - Interact with other supporters
 - Consume and spread violent, extremist content
 - Organize violent activity



Example #1: Pittsburgh synagogue shooter on Gab, posting before his attack



The image is a screenshot of a social media post on the Gab platform. At the top, there is a profile picture of a man and a header image showing a close-up of a handgun. Below the header, the user's name is "Robert Bowers" with a verified badge and a bio that reads "I HAS likes to bring invaders in that all our people. I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in." The main text of the post is a quote: "Jews are the children of satan (John 8:44) — — the end times christ is come in the flesh" followed by a date "11 Jan January 2018". Below the post, it says "Robert Bowers reposted". Underneath that is a repost from a user named "frogwave @__ribbit" who posted "6 days ago". The text of the repost is: "Jews are waging a propaganda war against Western civilization and it is so effective that we are headed towards certain extinction within the next 200 years and we're not even aware of it" and "You are living in a critical time in history where the internet has given us a small window of opportunity to snap our people out of their brainwash". At the bottom of the post are icons for "Comments", "Repost", and "Quote".

Example #2: ISIS activist on Twitter, posting to followers from Syria

Your account (@GreenBirdDabiq) is currently suspended. For more information, please log into .com.

GreenBirdDabiq
@greenbirddabiq2
Muhajirah living for the sake of Allah | Sham | Raqqa | DM for Kik/Surepot | Back from Suspension
Blessed land of Khilafah

TWEETS 36 FOLLOWING 75 FOLLOWERS 497 LIKES 6

Tweets Tweets & replies Photos & videos

GreenBirdDabiq @greenbirddabiq2 · 30 Dec 2015
"@GuyNamedSalmaan: Brothers, have you done anything to deserve a wife today?". LOL. I think the answer is usually "no."

GreenBirdDabiq @greenbirddabiq2 · 12 Dec 2015
I've said it once and I'll say it again. There are no Muslim democratic countries. Elections are haram and a usurpation of Allah's rule.

Many CVE Initiatives in the Tech Industry (Focus on ISIS)

- 2015: YouTube begins to redirect searches for ISIS content toward counter-ISIS videos
- 2016: Twitter steps up efforts to suspend ISIS accounts
- 2017: Facebook announces the use of AI to help identifying terrorist propaganda
- 2017: Major tech companies collaborate to remove extremist content from their platforms



The Big Question: Do All These Efforts Work?

We do not know.

- Currently, very little rigorous evaluation of CVE programs
- Empirical challenge: obtain measurable evidence of a 'decrease' in support for violent ideologies
 - The absence of radical sympathies \neq decline in extremism
- Innovations in social media research can shed light on this question

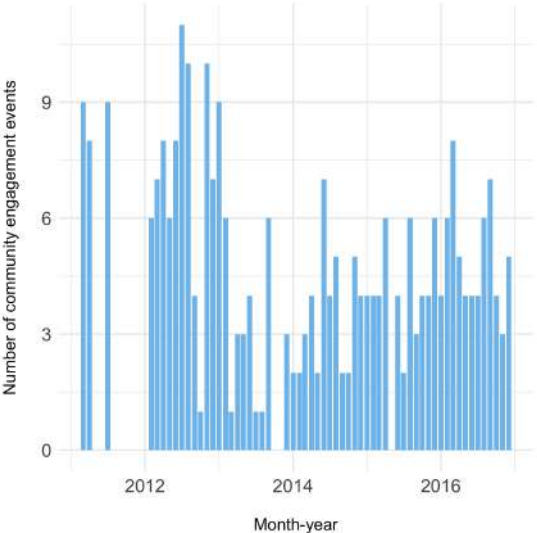
Case Study: Countering Violent Extremism in the United States

- “Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States” launched by the Obama administration in 2011
- Goal: strengthen the government’s engagement with local communities whose members may be targeted by violent groups
 - Increasing local communities’ understanding of extremism with training
 - Enhancing collaboration between communities and law enforcement
 - Building networks between public and private groups to counter extremism

DHS Community Engagement Program

- The Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) in the Department of Homeland Security has been at the forefront of these efforts in recent years
- Periodic meetings between law enforcement and members of various American Arab, Muslim, South Asian, and Middle Eastern communities
- Working assumption among policymakers:
 - Community members with personal connections to radicalizing individuals can detect early signs of extremism
 - Devise interventions to prevent violent extremism

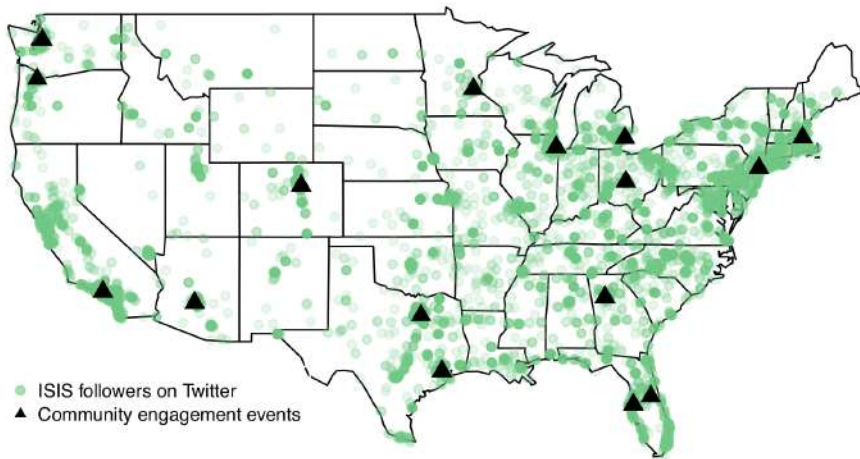
Number of Community Engagement Events by Month



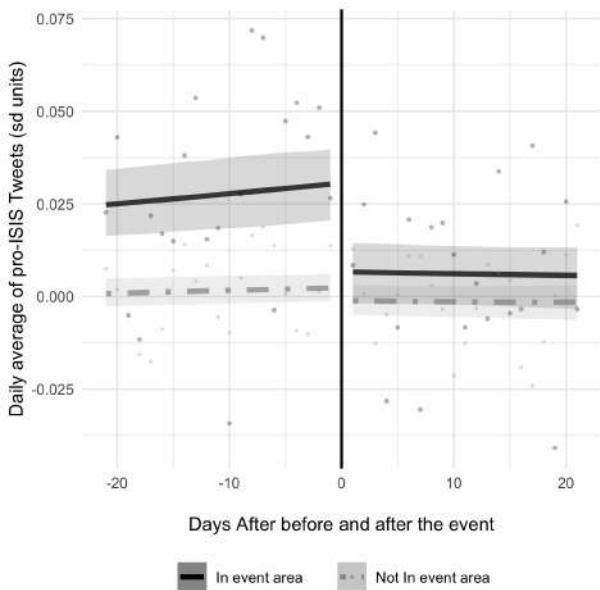
Did These Efforts Impact the Online Behavior of ISIS Sympathizers in the United States?

- Draw on a large dataset of Islamic State sympathizers on Twitter
 - Over 47K accounts in the United States
 - Tweeting content sympathizing with ISIS, discussing life in ISIS territories or foreign fighters, or tweets relating to the Syrian civil war
- Match with information on dozens of community engagement events held by the Department of Homeland Security from 2014-2016
- Examine whether community engagement events shaped subsequent pro-ISIS rhetoric in the areas where they are held

ISIS Sympathizers and DHS Community Engagement Activities in the United States



Community Engagement and Pro-ISIS Rhetoric



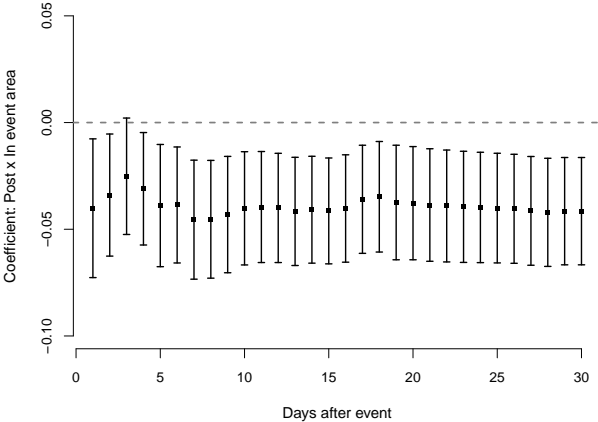
Diff-in-Diff Model

$$Y_{i,j,k} = \beta_1 P_{i,j,k} + \beta_2 T_{j,k} + \beta_3 (P_{i,j,k} \times T_{j,k}) + \alpha_k + \varepsilon_j \quad (1)$$

- $Y_{i,j,k}$: pro-ISIS index for tweet i posted by user j surrounding event k
- P : 0/1 dummy for tweets posted before or after the event
- T : 0/1 dummy for users who are predicted in the event area or not

Diff-in-Diff Results

ISIS sympathizers located in areas where CVE events were held significantly decreased posting of pro-ISIS content, up to a month after the events



What do These Results Mean?

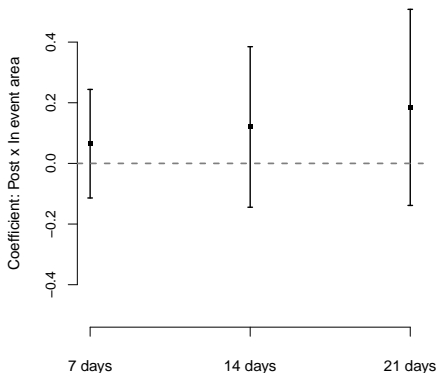
- The decline in pro-ISIS rhetoric after community engagement activities might be driven by
 - **De-radicalization** of ISIS sympathizers
 - **Strategic behavior** after becoming aware of government surveillance
 - Migration of ISIS sympathizers to private social media platforms
 - Self-censoring of extremist expression
 - **Increased suspension** of ISIS sympathizer accounts

Community Engagement and the Suppression of Pro-ISIS Rhetoric

- The American CVE program primarily **targeted Muslim communities**
- Critics argued that the program created a **climate of fear** in these communities, discouraging the expression of political opinions
- This might mean that individuals sympathizing with ISIS may have decreased pro-ISIS rhetoric simply to **avoid detection**

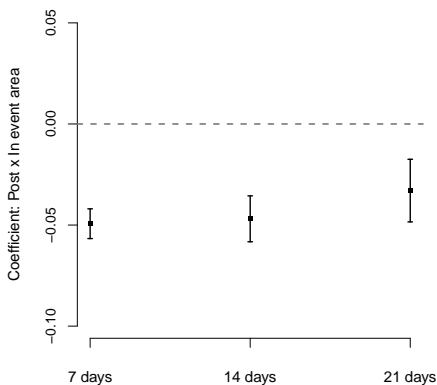
Additional Tests

- I examine whether ISIS sympathizers stopped using Twitter after community engagement events by looking at overall number of tweets
 - No change in the number of tweets posted
 - The only change is in the *content* of the tweets



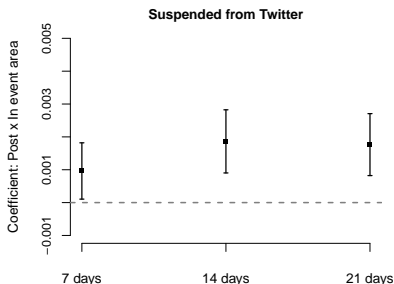
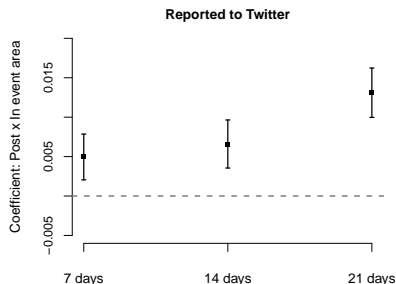
Additional Tests

- I also examine whether ISIS sympathizers stopped following propaganda-disseminating accounts
 - I find a significant decrease in the number of accounts followed



Additional Tests

- The decrease in pro-ISIS rhetoric observed in event areas could also be the result of increased vigilance in event areas
 - I find that community engagement events were followed by significantly higher reporting and suspension of accounts located in event areas



The American CVE Program Impacted the Online Behavior of ISIS Sympathizers on Twitter

- After community engagement events, ISIS sympathizers:
 - Significantly decreased posting pro-ISIS content
 - Unfollowed accounts that disseminated propaganda
- These results could be interpreted either as a sign of **de-radicalization** or **strategic behavior** resulting from increased awareness to government surveillance
- Community engagement events **increased vigilance** in the areas where they were held, increasing reporting and suspension of ISIS-supporting accounts

Concluding Remarks

- As investment in countering violent extremism increases, there is a growing need to evaluate its effectiveness
- While measuring a radicalization remains a challenge, social media data provides a useful window, especially when combining with 'offline' data
- More research is needed to shed light on whether the reduction in pro-ISIS rhetoric was caused by de-radicalization or by the suppression of extremist expression

Thank you!

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